A Walk Through the Rose Hill Cemetery

Historic Tour Guide No. 12

City of Bloomington, Indiana

Rose Hill's Symbols and Iconography:

Throughout modern history headstones have been decorated with symbolic images, stylistically reflecting current historical and architectural trends, along with changing tastes and trends. Rose Hill Cemetery is an excellent example of this variety, displaying stones from its pioneer beginnings to the present day.

Acorns - prosperity and fruitfulness
Anchor - hope and Christianity
Book - the Bible; if closed, a completed life, and if open, to register the name of the dead
Broken column - life cut short
Calla Lily - beauty and marriage
Cross with crown - victory and Christianity
Curtain or veil - passing from one existence to another
Doors and gates - passage from one realm to another
Dove - purity, peace and the Holy Ghost
Easter Lily - purity and chastity; casting off earthly things
FOE - Fraternal Order of Eagles, associated with the theater
Ferns – humility, frankness and sincerity
Flame - eternal life, may be within an urn
Hand coming down - depiction of God's presence
Hand pointing up - soul has risen to heaven
Hands together - marriage, earthly farewell or welcome
Hour glass - passing of time, cyclic nature of life and death
IHS or IHC - Greek or Latin abbreviations for Jesus
IOOF or three links - Odd Fellows, a social and benevolent order for the working class, the links symbolize Friendship, Love and Truth
Lamb - innocence; usually used on children's graves
Laurel - usually as a wreath; victory, eternity, immortality and chastity
Morning Glory - the Resurrection, youth and love
Palm frond - triumph over death
Rocks - permanence, stability, reliability, strength and God
Rose - martyrdom and purity; usually on the grave of a woman
Ivy - immortality, fidelity, friendship and the Trinity
Vines - relationship between God and man
Weeping Willow Tree - grief, sorrow, immortality and the gospel of Christ
Wings - ascension to heaven

Treestones
Popular during the Victorian era, these stones were both typically carved in limestone and could be ordered through Sears and Roebuck, making their prevalence in Rose Hill particularly significant. Some are tall and elaborate, others short and simple, and some are combined with Victorian-styled "soul houses." Often adorned with other forms of symbolism, treestones themselves when depicted as a broken stump, refer to a life cut short. Treestones often were used for members of the Woodmen of the World, an insurance society, evidenced by the fraternal order's symbol.

In Appreciation:

The individuals highlighted as part of this tour are but a small sampling of the hundreds of notable people and families buried within Rose Hill Cemetery. No one has been intentionally excluded.

Rose Hill Cemetery

Monroe County, named for President James Monroe, was established following the Treaty of St. Mary's Ohio, and in April 1818 the county seat of Bloomington was platted. Originally wooded hills, the centrally-located land on which the town was formed had already been converted over to farm fields by pioneers Robertson Graham and David Rogers. Along with construction of a court house, churches and similar establishments, the new town required a burial yard. In 1819 a site west of town was chosen by the County Commissioners. Called the Grave Yard, the site was so marked by a G.Y. carved into a large oak tree near the entrance. The County Board maintained the cemetery until 1868, when jurisdiction was passed to the City and it became known as City Cemetery. Now known as the 'Old Spencer Addition,' this original burial area is the most eastern section of the cemetery bordered by Fourth, Maple and Third Streets.

By the late 1800s, vandalism, recreational use and a lack of fulltime oversight had taken its toll on the cemetery. In 1892 the Ladies Cemetery Association, a civic group reporting to the City Council Cemetery Committee, formed "to improve and beautify the City Cemetery grounds." These eight women began raising funds for improvements, including expansion into what is now referred to as the 'Spencer Addition.' They also changed the cemetery's name to Rose Hill commemorating the many wild and cultivated roses growing throughout the grounds. Unfortunately at present, few rose bushes remain. By April 1893, a sexton's cottage was constructed, allowing full-time oversight of the cemetery. A fountain, made locally by Seward Foundry also was installed in the center of Evergreen Arbor, a circular planting of pine trees near the center of the new section. After years of vandalism it was relocated to Third Street Park in 1991. The mature pines were some of the 12 lost during a spring storm in 2000, but were replaced soon after that. An 1894 benefit performance by Henry B. Gentry of Bloomington's Gentry Brother's Circus, funded construction of an elaborate Fourth Street entrance gate designed by the city's first architect, John B. Nichols. Carved by James Voss using stone donated by several local quarries, the Gothic Revival-style gate had a central arch wide enough for vehicular traffic flanked on either side by smaller arched entrances for foot traffic.

Because no burial records were kept prior to 1897, all information before this date must be derived from newspaper articles, obituaries and the headstones. On those stones that are still readable, many names of the county's earliest pioneers can be found. A few prominent figures associated with the early years of Indiana University buried in Old Spencer Addition include the Rev. Elisha Ballantine, professor of Greek; Theophilus A. Wylie, a professor of natural philosophy and chemistry; Daniel Kirkwood, professor of mathematics; and, Lewis Bollman, the first graduate of Indiana Seminary who received his degree in 1830. Five Revolutionary War soldiers are known to be buried at Rose Hill, along with many more veterans of the Civil War and all other wars fought by Americans through at least the Vietnam War. Additionally, at least 12 of Bloomington's mayors are also buried here.

The cemetery was enlarged to the north and west between 1907 and 1927. A 1929 expansion to the east prompted removal of the original stone entrance, replaced with the current poured concrete and iron gate. Rose Hill Cemetery now encompasses 28 acres. Limestone walls along the north and west sides, and ditches throughout, were installed in 1936 as a Works Progress Administration project. Buried over time, the ditches were discovered and restored in 1993. A poured concrete wall replaced the limestone along Kirkwood Avenue in 2000. Additional interesting features in Rose Hill include the infant burial section along the western boundary, and the many family plots defined by elaborate fencing, higher retaining walls or low walls with coping stones. These have been locally referred to as "pens." Likewise, headstone placements in the newer sections do not necessarily conform to a straight grid, but instead often follow the roadways.

In 1905, the Ladies Cemetery Association along with several other women's service groups, incorporated as the Local Council of Women. Its first project was creation of Bloomington Hospital, and the group has continued to focus on health and human welfare needs since that time. In 1997 the City's Parks and Recreation Department assumed administration and maintenance of the cemetery from the Public Works Department.